

## *Servant Leadership*

*1 Kings 12:1-17, 25-29 – A Kingdom Divided*

In the passages that we heard today, we hear echoes in our world. Echoes of division, which brings with it pain and suffering, abuse of power. And so, I wanted to begin today by lighting a candle. A candle that seeks peace in our world. Seeks harmony, seeks understanding, respect, and healing. Let's take a moment to pray for peace.

*(Moment of silence) Amen.*

In many conversations over this past month, people have been expressing their sadness and grief, their anger and frustration at not knowing what to do in this world. This world is in quite a state when we look at the news. The world feels unbalanced right now. It's almost like the pendulum has swung from one side to the other extreme. This has led to this state of negativity, fear and anxiety. So I wonder, why is it that we are living in these extremes – in the right or wrong, the black or white, when we know that the world is more of a spectrum? That the world that we live in is really a world full of shades of grey?

The story that we hear today is the moment in history when Israel – at one point, had been united under the rule of David – now becomes split into the northern and southern kingdom. Israel, now referred to as the northern kingdom, was also referred to as Ephraim, which is the name for the Jeroboam tribe. The southern kingdom was referred to as Judah, which was ruled by King Rehoboam.

The story today is the moment where Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, who had died, made a trip into the northern territory to be installed as the king of Israel. Rehoboam was already recognized as the king of Jerusalem. They gathered at Shechem. Shechem was considered to be a hallowed place for the Israelites. It

was the place where Abraham built an altar to God. It was a place where the twelve tribes of Israel joined in tribal confederacy. So it made sense that this would be the gathering place where they would recognize king of all of Israel.

Rehoboam, however, began by deciding to consult with his father's advisors about a question that he was asked by Jeroboam and the tribal people of Israel. The people of Israel had asked him to make a different choice than his father did. King Solomon had treated the people ruthlessly. He overworked them and made their lives miserable. He punished them with whips if they didn't do enough. The people went, in good faith, to Rehoboam to change the situation. They suggested that if Rehoboam made their lives a bit easier, then they would willingly serve him and follow him as their king.

Rehoboam asked for three days to consider this request. That's when he asked his father's advisors what he should do with this. They suggested that he should be a servant to his people. That he should be considerate of their needs. That he should respond with compassion and work with the people. If he did this, they believe that the people would do anything for him.

Rehoboam decided that he didn't like this advice and he rejected it. He then went to the younger men who he had grown up with who were his advisors. They gave him the opposite advice. They suggested that he make it even harder for the people, to show them who was in charge. Rehoboam, in the end, chose to ignore the people. When the people realized that the king was not going to listen to them, Jeroboam, who had come to meet with Rehoboam with the intention of following him ended up taking ten of the twelve tribes with him to the north. The kingdom was once again split, making Jeroboam the king of Israel and King Rehoboam the king of Judah.

One is left to wonder, will humanity ever learn? As of people of faith, we know that God is not seeking a dictatorship. God wants us to be in servant leadership. As Christians, we follow Jesus because he was a servant leader. Jesus said, "I have come to earth not to be served, but to serve." We see this happening in The Last Supper when Jesus washed the feet of the disciples as just one example. After Jesus died and was resurrected and the apostle Paul began to live his ministry in the world, he wrote various letters to various

communities that he served, writing that a leader should be a servant to the people. He believed that leaders who inspire and cause people to follow are leaders who have a presence that is non-anxious. It says in Romans 12:17, "Do not repay any evil for evil." He wrote to the Ephesians 4:26 and said, "Be angry, but do not sin." Or in 1 Thessalonians 14:13, where it says, "Grieve, but do not grieve as one who has no hope."

So who do you follow and why? For those of you who are on social media, this is a question that we explore on a regular basis. Is this person on Instagram someone who inspires me so much so that I want to follow them? Are they my friend? Do they make me laugh? Do they have influence that I want to align myself with? Is this someone that I trust? These are all questions that we can ask ourselves when we are choosing who we want to follow. So the question for us today is: Who are we, as people of faith, called to serve? How will we choose to live our lives? Will it be with love and compassion? And what happens when we do not listen to the wise ones in our midst? We have elders, we have people of wisdom who have experienced so much, and I think we all need to take time to listen.

Rehoboam chose the path that benefited his self-interest, and in the end it backfired. By asking more of the people, he ended up with less. I believe that the kind of leadership that God is calling us to is one that draws people together in harmony and for the greater good. When this is done, the burden is shared evenly. The work is shared by all. The demonstration today with our Halloween candy was about sharing all that we have with everyone. We need, as people of faith, to adopt a posture of curiosity, not judgement. We need to approach life with appreciation for everything that everyone offers. So instead of seeing the divisions, instead of seeing something as a block to what we are trying to do...how can we reframe it so that we see the possibilities? So that we are curious to truly understand what is going on in that moment, and how we can be a part of something to make it even better? How will we learn from Rehoboam and his decision to be served, rather than to serve? Will we refrain from retaliation when someone hurts us or lashes out at us? Jeroboam and the people of Israel, when they were told that Rehoboam was going to make it even harder, didn't fight back. They went on their way and did what they were called to do.

There is a great definition of leadership that I wanted to share with you that I reflects what God is calling us to do and be. It comes from a book entitled *The New Parish*. It defines leadership in this way:

“We define leadership as the capacity to mobilize desire for reconciliation and renewal through collective action. While paying ongoing attention to God’s story, to the fidelity of the group within its place, and to the leader’s own transformation. Leaders develop the capacity to draw others toward faithful presence, together as they discern the way into the faithful future.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s about drawing people together. How can we lead in a way that God has called us? How do we serve not only one another, but the world in which we are living in right now? To bring about peace and harmony? How will we not get caught up, as Rehoboam did, in choosing a direction that divides? This is what we are being called to do. So how will the teachings of Jesus inspire us to serve all people in love? To share what we have with one another?

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish*, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 170.